Reference

Los Angeles Times
latimes.com.

http://www.latimes.com/tcn/ontario/news/la-iv0020001jan25.story

INLAND VALLEY

EPA says chemical in water poses risk

Environmental study recommends limiting acceptable level of perchlorate found in more than 50 wells in the Inland Valley.

By David Hermann / david.hermann@latimes.com

January 25 2002

More than 50 wells across the Inland Valley show higher than newly recommended levels of a pollutant that government health and environmental officials say can damage the development of unborn children and cause cancer in adults.

Last Friday, the Environmental Protection Agency released the initial results of a new health risk assessment for perchlorate that recommends limiting the chemical in drinking water to near undetectable levels.

"I think generally we can say that the [health] effects that we saw were at certainly a lower [exposure] level than we had initially expected," Lisa Fasano, an EPA spokeswoman, said Thursday. "The types of problems are more worrisome." Health officials have known since the release of a federal EPA report in 1998 that perchlorate, a chemical commonly found in solid rocket fuel and fireworks, can damage the thyroid gland.

Regional state water boards are responsible for regulating the safety of ground water in California.

That means identifying perchlorate polluters and requiring them to clean the problem up, according to Kurt Berchtold, the assistant executive officer of the Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Berchtold said his agency believes it has identified the major sources of perchlorate pollution in its area, which includes San Bernardino and Riverside. The sites include a former Lockheed plant near Redlands, the Stringfellow Acid Pits in Jurupa and a plant owned by Goodrich where the tire company researched solid rocket fuel.

But the sources of the contamination of wells in Chino, Claremont, Fontana, Pomona, La Verne, Rancho Cucamonga and San Dimas are more mysterious.

Several defense contractors, including GenCorp Aerojet and General Dynamics, operated munitions plants nearby, but Kevin Mayer, a perchlorate specialist for the EPA, said no definitive sources have been identified.

"We've talked to the DTSC (state Department of Toxic Substances Control), the regional water board, and I'm not coming up with anything obvious," he said. "It's very possible that those companies could have been doing

9857

some testing or disposal in that area, but we don't have any documentation."

The EPA's most recent study concludes that perchlorate poses the greatest threat to fetuses when their mothers are exposed at levels higher than 1 ppb. Adults are at much less risk.

"It's a low risk, but it isn't a zero risk," Fasano said.

The state Department of Health Services responded immediately to the EPA study, dropping its action level for perchlorate from 18 ppb to 4 ppb.

"The new level is effective immediately, although the understanding is that it will take some effort to achieve it," Rufus Howell, the assistant chief of the department's drinking water division, said Thursday.

Howell said the department's new perchlorate level is strictly advisory and will not be regulated by the state. The advisory level requires public water agencies and private water companies to notify local officials if the water they are producing exceeds 4 ppb of perchlorate.

"Our recommendation is that customers be notified as well, but it is not a requirement," Howell said, but notification of public officials must take place within 30 days of a higher than recommended perchlorate sample. "Agencies may want to take a sample right away."

The state's action has some local water agencies scrambling.

In Rialto, the city-operated water utility stopped pumping water from two of its wells because the perchlorate levels exceeded the 4 ppb recommendation.

"We weren't required to shut those down. We simply did as a result of the state's action," said John Menke, the city's acting public works director.

Menke said the perchlorate levels in the wells were no higher than 8 ppb, well within the state's previous recommended level. The city had previously shut down another well with perchlorate levels above 50 ppb.

"It's really so that there's no question that we're providing the safest, best water we can," Menke said.

Rialto has 14 municipal wells and Menke said the closure of these three because of perchlorate contamination will not affect the utility's ability to deliver water to its 48,000 customers.

Chino, like many cities, blends its perchlorate-contaminated well water with clean water to the point at which officials think the water is safe.

Chino Public Works Director Pat Glover said the city buys the clean water, which is imported from Northern California, and mixes it with the well water in reservoirs.

Glover said that it is easy to blend the water to near undetectable perchlorate levels in the winter when the demand for water is lower. He said the levels in drinking water rise in the summer, when imported water is more scarce and the city is forced to rely more on its local wells.

"We're reasonably sure that last summer it was at or below 7 parts per billion," he said. "We'll have to take a strong look at this before the summer to ensure that we either meet the 4 parts per billion level or comply with the noticing requirements."

In La Verne, all but two of the city's wells show levels of perchlorate above 4 ppb.

Dan Keesey, La Verne's director of public works, said he hasn't had a chance yet to figure out what the city will do to meet the state recommended levels.

La Verne also blends its drinking water to reduce the level of contaminants in the water that it pumps from its wells, but Keesey said perchlorate-free water will be in high demand this summer, given the state's action.

"Southern California is already under the gun to reduce its demand for imported water," Keesey said, adding that the state is scheduled to lose some of the water that it imports from the Colorado River. "Where are we going to make up the difference? Are we going to make it up through conservation or ground water? What our answer's going to be, I don't know."

But even the water that the Metropolitan Water District imports from the Colorado River contains perchlorate levels higher than the new state recommendation.

District spokesman Bob Muir said perchlorate levels are as high as 9 ppb in that water. He said the district blends that water with perchlorate-free water from Northern California for a finished product with perchlorate levels ranging from undetectable to 7 ppb.

Muir said the district is working with the state and will be contacting the 26 agencies to which it provides water to help them formulate a plan to notify the public.

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives. For information about reprinting this article, go to www.lats.com/rights.